

PRELIMINARY STATEMENT OF THE NDI INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVER MISSION TO GEORGIA'S OCTOBER 26, 2024 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

October 27, 2024

INTRODUCTION

This preliminary statement is offered by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) international election observer delegation to the 2024 Georgia parliamentary elections.

The delegation, which included observers from 10 countries, was led by the Honorable Tom Malinowski, former United States Congressman and former Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor; Ambassador Per Eklund, former European Union Ambassador to Georgia; and Dr. Tamara Cofman Wittes, NDI's President. This statement builds on the findings of NDI's pre-election assessment mission in February, and the analysis of six long-term thematic analysts deployed in July. Throughout the observation process, NDI has closely collaborated with international, regional and citizen election monitoring organizations, most notably the International Society for Fair Elections (ISFED) and the International Republican Institute (IRI).

The aims of NDI's election observation mission are to accurately and impartially assess various aspects of the election process, and to offer recommendations to support transparent, accountable, and inclusive elections that garner public confidence in the process. The Institute has undertaken its mission in accordance with the *Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation*, its accompanying *Code of Conduct for International Election Observers*, and Georgian law. NDI's methodology for assessing elections is based on the premise that all aspects of the electoral process must be considered.

The delegation would like to stress that this statement is preliminary in nature. The official results are not final, and any electoral complaints that may be lodged are yet to be adjudicated. NDI will monitor these disputes and issue a final report. The delegation recognizes that it is the people of Georgia who will ultimately determine the credibility and legitimacy of their election, and the trajectory of Georgian democracy.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Georgia's 2024 parliamentary elections saw greater turnout than the last two elections demonstrating Georgian citizens' commitment to the democratic process. These elections were conducted under a fully proportional system for the first time. In addition, numerous changes to the election code, and use of new technologies, resulted in significant changes to the conduct of the election. The Central Election Commission (CEC) worked diligently to support voter understanding of these changes. Polling stations were generally calm and organized. However, citizen observers reported a significant increase in serious violations from the previous elections including violence, voter intimidation and instances of ballot stuffing.

It is clear that the pre-election period failed to meet fundamental standards for democratic elections. The government's passage of legislation that labels civic actors as foreign agents and its campaign to intimidate those that criticized ruling party policies generated a climate of fear. State-sponsored efforts to discredit and legally restrict election observers forced them to divert resources to self-defense from their central activities to safeguard the elections. The legislation also had a chilling effect on advocates, civic educators and other groups contributing to the political discourse. Ruling party leaders also threatened to criminalize opposition political parties. Legislation passed by the government restricted the rights of and stigmatized vulnerable LGBTQI+ communities in contravention to regional and international human rights standards to which Georgia is obliged. Taken together, the government's actions caused the European Union to halt Georgia's accession path.

A fragmented, politicized media environment limited voters' access to impartial information. The ruling party had disproportionate influence on this environment given its control over state media as well as privately held channels. That said, both ruling party and opposition channels refused to broadcast opposing political ads. Meanwhile few electoral contestants participated in broadcasted debates. Attacks on and intimidation of independent media further constrained public access to balanced discourse and coverage of key issues in the campaign.

The pre-election period was also compromised by widespread threats, harassment, and in some cases violence, affecting voters, activists, and political actors, and their families. Women were disproportionately subjected to incessant and gendered attacks. Nonpartisan citizen observers as well as political parties and the media noted multiple instances of voter intimidation affecting Georgian citizens employed by the public sector in an apparent effort to deter participation or compel voting for the ruling party.

Throughout election day, reports from citizen observers provided valuable information to support our observation findings. On election day, citizen observers witnessed widespread violations of the neutrality zone around polling stations by gatherings of ruling party figures and unauthorized persons. Our short-term observers and citizen observers also reported intimidation of voters. Citizen observers also reported an increase in critical incidents, including violence against observers, voters and party representatives.

NDI stresses that this statement is preliminary in nature and that the post-election environment continues to unfold. As final votes are totaled, complaints are heard and disputes adjudicated, and as parliamentary seats allocated, NDI calls on all Georgian political actors to respect the will of the people as expressed through the ballot, exercise patience and restraint as results are finalized. NDI further calls for institutions to investigate allegations of election violations, prosecute criminal conduct, and resolve disputes in accordance with the law.

The Georgian people have clearly expressed the value they place on their democratic path. Georgian political actors must move beyond their winner-take-all mentality and commit to pluralism in order to advance this path. The governing party, in particular, must ensure that it

maintains state neutrality and protects the ability for all Georgians to participate freely and equally in political life.

POLITICAL CONTEXT

Once considered a beacon of democracy in a troubled region, Georgia has suffered a dramatic reversal of its democratic progress. The legacy of a majoritarian electoral framework and personality-driven politics, has driven mistrust between parties, thwarted attempts at coalition-building and alienated voters from the political process. Since NDI's [pre-election assessment](#) in February, the government has passed legislation constraining the rights and freedoms of Georgian civil society, threatened to ban opposition parties, and taken other actions that raised serious questions about Georgian Dream's commitment to the country's democracy. In this sense GD has demonstrated the majoritarian overreach exhibited by previous ruling parties.

According to NDI polls, 93 percent of Georgians believe democracy is important. However, less than half of respondents – 45 percent – believe Georgia is a democracy today. Increasing hostility toward civil society and the independent media over the past year, coupled with anti-US and EU rhetoric has deteriorated relations between Georgia and its traditional allies in the West. The EU accession process, initiated in December 2023, was effectively halted ten months later by the European Council

In the six months leading up to the elections, the Georgian Parliament abolished gender quotas on legislative candidate lists, passed the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence (LTFI), which stigmatizes and restricts the operations of civil society and media; and passed a sweeping legislative package 'On Protection of Family Values and Minors' restricting the rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex (LGBTQI+) Georgians. While thousands took to the streets of Tbilisi for weeks in May to protest the passage of the LTFI, responses to the anti-gender legislation were more muted.

The evolution and mobilization of security forces and regulations also increased tensions ahead of elections. A special bureau within the Ministry of Interior (MoI) was responsible for the violent crackdown of LTFI protesters, and two officials deemed responsible were sanctioned by the US government for those abuses. The disproportionate response to the protests were justified by the government under the criminal code effectively barring gatherings in front of certain public buildings. The same ban was extended to include the CEC just days before election day. Also, just prior to election day, the Prime Minister visited the MoI and publicly praised the sanctioned individuals.

The 'winner-take-all' approach observed in previous elections was exacerbated throughout 2024 as leaders of the ruling and opposition parties traded hostile rhetoric. The animosity and lack of trust was further inflamed with Georgian Dream leadership, including the party's founder and Honorary Chairman, Bidzina Ivanishvili, threatening to ban its historical rival and former ruling party, the United National Movement (UNM) and other splinter parties. GD leaders and government officials extended their inflamed rhetoric to civil society, including citizen election observers.

While Georgia's fractured opposition demonstrated greater cooperation in the immediate months leading up to elections, they failed to negotiate a comprehensive coalition agreement and ultimately came together under four separate candidate lists -- Unity National Movement, Coalition for Change, Strong Georgia and For Georgia. President Salome Zurbashvili became a leading voice in calling for Georgia to return to its European path, and established the "Georgian Charter", which encompassed the nine points that the country needed to take for accession laid out by the European Commission as well as a commitment to a series of democratic reforms. This included repealing all anti-democratic laws and pardoning those who were fined or detained in the summer's protests. The Charter also envisioned that following implementation of reforms the parties would commit to calling for new elections, likely for the Fall of 2025. In addition to a number of smaller parties and independent MPs, the four main opposition groupings all signed the charter.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

For the first time, Georgian parliamentary elections were conducted under a fully proportional system, as mandated by 2017 amendments to the Constitution. The departure from a mixed system was intended to address long-standing concerns about the lack of plurality in parliament. However the introduction of a new prohibition on electoral blocs, combined with Parliament's retention of a five percent threshold for parties to reach parliament, rather than a reduction to two percent for the next two elections as negotiated in the April 19 Charles Michel agreement¹, was viewed as an attempt to weaken opposition representation in parliament.

Amendments to the legal framework governing elections² were made on more than 20 occasions since the 2020 parliamentary elections. Amongst these numerous changes several concentrated decision making authority under the ruling party, reducing accountability and drawing into question the independence of the Central Election Commission (CEC). Reforms passed shortly after the previous parliamentary elections were built on multi-party consensus and public consultation, and sought to address gaps raised by electoral stakeholders, such as clarification on Precinct Election Commissions (PEC) recounts, extensions to the complaint process, adjustments to abuse of state resources regulations, and additional safeguards for mobile voting.

However, amendments introduced in 2023 and 2024 were frequently pushed through by the ruling party and lacked broad-based political support. Examples of changes included reducing the threshold for electing the CEC Chairperson and nonpartisan members to a simple majority; diminishing the role of the President in the CEC candidate selection process and transferring the nomination of CEC members to the Speaker of Parliament; abolishing the requirement that the CEC Deputy Chairperson be assigned to the opposition; disbanding the CEC's advisory group

¹ Following a boycott of parliament and call for snap elections by opposition parties, the US and EU led negotiations to end the impasse which resulted in most parties signing the April 19 Agreement, also known as the Charles Michel agreement. UNM did not sign. [The Agreement](#) addressed perceptions of polarized justice, set forth ambitious electoral reforms including a shift to a fully proportional parliamentary system and a two percent threshold, judicial reforms, and called for a more balanced power-sharing in the Parliament by giving the chairmanship of five parliamentary committees to the opposition.

² Elections in Georgia are governed by the Constitution of Georgia, the Election Code of Georgia as well as CEC decrees and ordinances, the Law on Political Associations of Citizens, the Administrative Offenses Code, the Law on Public Assemblies and Demonstrations and Media and communications laws.

comprised of technical and civic experts and the Office of Public Defender; reducing the threshold for decision-making at the CEC; and revoking the gender quota and associated financial incentives for parties for the inclusion of female candidates.

Such rushed and last-minute amendments to electoral rules run counter to international best practices supporting inclusion and transparency in election reform. The notable changes to the CEC's composition, nomination and decision-making processes eroded trust in the commission's independence, as consistently noted by Georgian citizen observers and opposition parties.

Parliament also failed to address important recommendations from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)'s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the Venice Commission, the April 19 Charles Michel Agreement from 2021, and other international and domestic organizations, such as strengthening electoral dispute resolution mechanisms, campaign finance parameters and oversight, and abuse of state resources deterrence.³

Electoral Dispute Resolution

As with previous elections, several stakeholders voiced significant concerns regarding the effectiveness of election dispute resolution mechanisms and independence of the judicial system in Georgia. Complaints mostly pertained to violations of campaign rules, misuse of administrative resources, or the establishment, organization, or functioning of PECs. Complaints are typically resolved by District Election Commissions (DECs), depending on the jurisdiction, but can be appealed to higher level commission and the judiciary, which also hears challenges to CEC decisions. Of the approximately 200 complaints filed with the election administration and courts as of October 22, two were granted, 92 were dismissed, 1 was found moot, and 104 were still pending.⁴ Civil society Organizations (CSOs) and parties noted that the CEC was reluctant to satisfy complaints, and required a high threshold of proof. Judicial rulings generally upheld the election commission's decisions, and complaints were frequently dismissed. Judicial nominees and judges are widely perceived⁵ as poorly vetted and captured by the ruling party however, which could impact their credibility in resolving post-election challenges.

The Interagency Commission for Free and Fair Elections (IACFFE) was mandated to respond to violations of election legislation by civil servants.⁶ However, it lacked formal authority and had lost credibility over several election cycles due to frustration from civic and opposition participants who felt that the composition did not allow for impartial examinations. Though the IACFFE considered over 30 cases of alleged misuse of administrative resources and other campaign violations in the 2024 elections, most opposition parties and major citizen observer groups did not participate in the commission, which impeded its effectiveness and relevance.

ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

³A way ahead for Georgia Charles Michel agreement:

https://euneighbourseast.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/210418_mediation_way_ahead_for_publication_0.pdf

⁴ CEC data reflecting first instance decisions as of the end of October 22

⁵ <https://courtwatch.ge/en/articles/4fd66c8d-9bd2-4c21-beee-90671903b74b>;

<https://courtwatch.ge/articles/47ngos?fbclid=iwar3qfinxosxgjanpfbmtj86wammohrrw7ss4kaqfpm2nt9b9sbq8jt474lu>

⁶ Ministry of Justice Order No. 1007, June 24, 2024

The CEC

Elections in Georgia are administered through a three-tiered structure consisting of the Central Election Commission (CEC) and staff, the 73 District Election Commissions (DECs), and 3,111⁷ Precinct Election Commissions (PECs) and the Supreme Election Commission of Autonomous Republic of Adjara (SEC) and staff.

The CEC is a technically competent election management body that managed the lead-up to the 2024 elections in compliance with Georgian laws and timelines. CEC operations were largely conducted transparently, including making decisions and data available online and via livestream broadcast of CEC sessions. The commission was responsive to information requests by Georgian and international stakeholders. The CEC also engaged in extensive voter education efforts to inform voters about the new proportional representation system, new election technologies, and voting abroad, but several stakeholders raised concerns that the overall campaign did not adequately target voters outside the major urban areas. While the CEC held regular press conferences and remained communicative throughout the pre-election period, its response to criticism from civil society or political parties was not always constructive, including releasing numerous statements calling such concerns information manipulation.

Historically, the CEC had relatively high public confidence; however this perception was damaged following reforms which shifted leadership appointments exclusively to the ruling party. Opposition parties and citizen observer groups raised concern about the commission's independence and ability to withstand pressure from the ruling party. The groups also cited the aforementioned changes in the CEC's decision-making bodies and procedures, assigning the roles of PEC members no later than seven days before the election - instead of on election day - and under less transparent circumstances as additional factors which could hinder inclusion and accountability.

Under the CEC, 53,678 commission members were responsible for administering elections at the DECs and PECs across Georgia. All levels of commissions consisted of both party-appointed members and nonpartisan professionals recruited at the local level and approved by the CEC and DECs. CEC proceedings to select DEC members lacked consensus and only approximately 5 percent of temporary DEC posts were selected through a two-thirds majority in the first round of voting, while a majority of members were selected in the second round by a simple majority. Recruitment of nonpartisan PEC members was not competitive – in nearly all cases, the number of applicants were the same as or only a few more than the number of positions to be filled. Opposition parties also expressed frustration with the process, alleging that application materials were not shared in a timely manner.

The CEC Training Center took steps to improve the competence of the DEC and PEC members through a certification program. The subsequent cascade training program for appointed PEC members was well organized, partisan members did not consistently attend the training, which could impact their understanding of procedures and performance on election day.

Election Technology

⁷ The total number of PECs includes 3,031 regular and 13 special PECs, such as at hospitals or military barracks, in Georgia as well as 67 PECs abroad.

For the first time in Georgia, the CEC deployed several electronic election technologies (EETs) at the majority of polling stations, including a voter verification device and a ballot scanning and counting device which would generate preliminary results that were then transmitted to the CEC via tablet. There was consensus among political parties to introduce new technologies in 2022 to reduce human error in the process, improve efficiencies and reduce opportunities for fraud. However the use of technology in the voting process was a major change to Georgian voting culture – including a new way of marking and casting ballots. The CEC procured the technologies from Smartmatic whose technicians worked alongside CEC staff to test and deploy the devices.

The EETs were used in 2,263 (74.6 percent) of PECs representing approximately 90 percent of voters. The remaining 768 (25.4 percent) of PECs, representing approximately 10 percent of voters, used traditional methods. These polling stations that maintained non-electronic (or “traditional”) methods were determined by having 300 or fewer registered voters or being located more than 20 kilometers from the relevant DEC. For polling stations serving ethnic minorities, 166 (53.9 percent) used EETs while 142 (46.1 percent) used traditional methods. Based on the assumption EETs would reduce voting time, the CEC increased the maximum number of voters at each PEC from 1,500 to 3,000 and reduced the number of PECs from the 3,657 in the 2020 elections. However, in the lead up to elections, stakeholders raised concern regarding the possibility of bottlenecks in processing voters, especially in larger polling stations. Moreover, there was lingering concern regarding how ballots invalidated in the electronic count but that demonstrated clear voter intent would be managed in the final manual count.⁸

Many stakeholders praised the CEC for implementing the EET under tight timelines, however, some raised concerns about the rapid deployment with limited piloting. In April 2023, Pro V&V, a certified⁹ company from the US, conducted an audit which evaluated isolated features rather than the system as a whole. At the time of writing, a second three-stage audit by Pro V&V was in progress and would not be complete until election day or just after. In line with good practice, the CEC piloted the verification and counting machines in several local and by-elections prior to 2024, but it did not undertake comprehensive nationwide stress tests of all the technologies simultaneously. In addition, no testing results, written reports or other information to confirm simulations were ever made available to the public. While the CEC’s online portal for rapid results publication enhanced transparency, it was also unclear whether the additional preliminary results transmission component from electronic PECs was tested for heavy user traffic, or whether results information would be made available in an open data format.

POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE CAMPAIGN

The official 60-day campaign period was marked by personalized and hostile rhetoric by political competitors. However, the campaign environment was calmer than in past years. Eighteen

⁸ Ballots counted in electronic machines will also be hand counted which will serve as the official count. However ballots that are marked invalid by the optical mark recognition of the machine - because for instance voters circled names instead of marking the circle - are also supposed to be invalidated in the hand count, despite the fact that voter intent is clear. This is to ensure there’s no discrepancy between invalid ballots between the electronic count and the hand count.

⁹ Certified by the US Electoral Assistance Commission (EAC)

candidate lists were approved by the CEC.¹⁰ However, of the 18 lists, major contenders in the campaign centered around GD and four main opposition coalitions and parties.¹¹ Due to amendments to the Election Code which eliminated electoral blocs and increased the threshold to five percent to obtain a seat in Parliament, many smaller parties opted to negotiate with larger parties, submitting candidates to common lists. Multiple attempts to form a single coalition list failed due to long histories of mutual mistrust and personal political ambition by various leaders. Coalition-building attempts continued up to the deadline for submitting candidate lists.

Campaign messages were dominated by discussion of the future direction of the country and Georgia's path to EU integration. Most opposition parties portrayed the election as a referendum between partnership with Europe or with Russia, while the ruling party framed the elections as a choice between peace if they were to win and war if the opposition won. GD messaging highlighted their accomplishments on the economy and also stoked fear and conspiracies regarding the opposition. Specifically, GD sought to discredit the opposition by describing them as members of a "global war party" which was intent on undermining Georgian sovereignty and GD's rule. GD leaders also called for banning the UNM and its splinter parties,¹² protecting traditional and Christian values (through stigmatizing LGBTQI+ individuals), and codifying Orthodox Christianity as the State religion in the Constitution.¹³ According to most political and civil society stakeholders, GD's message of stability and continued economic growth resonated in rural areas, where voters had limited access to diverse media, and for whom public employment and government social assistance were both important sources of income.

While the campaign period began on August 26. Activity commenced more slowly than in past years but gradually increased as election day approached. Campaign methods included door-to-door canvassing, meetings with voters, distribution of campaign leaflets and newspapers (including in minority languages), posters, TV and print media advertising, billboards, social media, and rallies. GD's campaign was by far the most visible, largest in scale, and included a broader range of activities throughout the campaign period. Opposition parties focused their efforts on competitive and demographically important areas such as Tbilisi, Adjara and the western regions, due to historical patterns of geographic support for the UNM and local party networks. Urban centers such as Tbilisi and Batumi were more competitive, while Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti, with large ethnic minority populations, were less competitive.

¹⁰ The number of electoral subjects participating in the parliamentary elections decreased from 2020 when 48 parties and two coalitions presented lists.

¹¹ The 18 electoral subjects that registered lists included European Democrats, Georgian Dream, Alliance of Patriots, Girchi, Gakharia for Georgia, Left Alliance, Unity-National Movement, Change Georgia, Coalition for Changes Gvaramia Melia Girchi Droa, Strong Georgia - Lelo, For People, For Liberty!, Our United Georgia, Tribuna, We, Georgia's Unity, Georgia, Labour Party of Georgia, Free Georgia, and The Party of Georgian Unity and Development.

¹² In a public speech on October 19 [GD Honorary Chairman Bidzina Ivanishvili stated](#) "Moreover, upon securing the constitutional majority, we will enshrine the ban in the nation's highest legal document, ensuring that the UNM and its affiliated or successor parties are held fully accountable for crimes against the people, including war crimes"

¹³ The Georgian Orthodox Church acknowledged the GD proposal as an "act of courtesy," but rejected the offer to constitutionally declare Orthodoxy the state religion. The Patriarchate and the GD agreed that any decision will adhere to three main principles: a) no provision will be added without the input of the Church; b) it will not take the form of declaring Orthodoxy the state religion; and c) the constitutional amendment will strengthen and enhance the role of the Church.

Opposition parties regularly reported that a climate of fear pervaded local communities and affected their ability to campaign, raise funds, and recruit PEC members and party representatives. They also reported facing difficulties in renting campaign offices and securing space for billboards throughout the country, including pressure on property owners not to rent space to them. This limited their ability to meet with voters in public, and compelled them to focus on door-to-door canvassing as their primary campaign method. Opposition parties again highlighted intimidation tactics by state and administrative bodies and by the State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG), reportedly discouraging members of the public from attending opposition meetings. Incidents of targeted violence of political leaders¹⁴ and activists were also reported up until the week of the election. These actions undermined the freedom of assembly and compromised the ability of some parties to effectively compete.

Allegations of vote-buying and undue influence on voters were also reported by CSOs¹⁵. According to opposition parties and citizen observers, public employees were mobilized to compile lists of voters supporting GD and to collect their ID numbers. In other cases, they alleged that preparations to manipulate the vote took the form of local GD party coordinators or public officials paying for or confiscating ID cards until after election day.

The misuse of administrative resources¹⁶, blurring of the lines between state and party¹⁷, and pressure on government employees¹⁸ are a persistent problem in Georgian elections. The NDI mission observed large mobilization of public employees at GD rallies while CSOs and opposition parties reported pressure on public sector workers, including teachers, municipal workers and others dependent on state employment and social aid and benefits to attend GD campaign events or show party loyalty, particularly in rural and economically underdeveloped areas¹⁹. CSOs and opposition parties also reported artificial job creation by the government in those areas to shore up support at critical times. In addition, the timing of a large land grant to the Orthodox Church - and its subsequent endorsement - just weeks before the elections was notably suspicious.²⁰

President Zourabishvili was also accused of misusing administrative resources by hosting an election observation coordination platform and opposition coalition negotiations at the presidential palace.

¹⁴<https://transparency.ge/en/post/october-23-attack-levani-gogichaishvili-one-leaders-gakharia-georgia-subway-station>

¹⁵<https://isfed.ge/eng/gantskhadebebi/samartliani-archevnebis-gantskhadeba-amomrchevlebze-zetsolis-faqtebtan-dakavshirebit>

¹⁶<https://transparency.ge/en/post/october-7-georgian-dream-secret-election-campaigns-were-held-expense-municipalities-budgets>

¹⁷<https://transparency.ge/en/post/september-29-illegal-use-administrative-resources-oni-georgian-dream-candidate-parliament-gocho>

¹⁸<https://isfed.ge/eng/2024-saparlamento/2024-tslis-saparlamento-archevnebis-tsinasaarchevno-periodis-monitorings-shualeduri-angarishi-27-agvisto-30-seqtemberi>

¹⁹[THE LONG-TERM OBSERVATION MISSION OF THE 2024 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS III INTERIM REPORT](#)

²⁰<https://transparency.ge/en/post/september-29-illegal-use-administrative-resources-gardabani-georgian-dream-candidate-parliament>

Limited incidents of violence were reported in the formal campaign period, including physical attacks on party members and campaigners, disruption of campaign events, and damage to campaign offices, billboards and posters. Both opposition and CSOs interlocutors highlighted the slow pace of investigations by the police eroded trust of the law enforcement and deepened suspicions of the state's direct involvement in these incidents.

Campaign Finance

Opaque spending and uneven access to resources continues to be a feature of Georgian political campaigns. Since the last parliamentary election, monitoring and enforcement of campaign finance shifted from the State Audit Office to the newly created Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) in line with long-standing recommendations for an independent oversight body. However there were concerns about the bureau's independence and impartial application of the law. For example, the bureau's head is appointed by the Prime Minister without other legislative approval. The bureau's classification of select CSOs and their leaderships as subjects with a 'declared electoral goal' under the Law on Political Associations of Citizens fails to respect the rights of CSOs to advocate their own views, even where those views coincide with political party platforms. While the subsequent decision to overturn the classification was welcomed, that it came following a public request from the Prime Minister raised further questions about the bureau's independence. Though Georgia has made incremental improvements to its political financing regime, ongoing issues of abuse of state resources, opaque funding sources, and the preponderance of resources concentrated within a single political party highlight gaps in regulatory policies, oversight and enforcement. The ACB's credibility remains compromised until it addresses such deficits.

GD had a significant financial advantage in the 2024 elections, allowing it to massively outspend its opponents and contributing to an uneven playing field. GD received over 50 percent of all donations for the first nine months of the year. According to Transparency International (TI), GD's share of total campaign expenditures of eight parties was 53 percent in the first six weeks of the campaign period.²¹ Investigative reports from the media and some CSOs linked GD donations to government contracts²² while parties traded allegations about dark money.

CIVIC SPACE AND ELECTION OBSERVATION

Discrediting Watchdogs and Election Observers

State-sponsored efforts to discredit, stigmatize, and hinder Georgian anti-corruption and election observation organizations dominated the pre-election period. While many Georgian nonpartisan citizen election monitoring organizations, including Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), ISFED, TI, and Public Movement "Multinational Georgia" (PMMG), were ultimately accredited to observe elections,²³ observer organizations suffered some of the most high-profile attacks in the lead-up to election day. Smear campaigns specifically disparaged the independence, professionalism and methodologies of the organizations, especially ISFED, seeking to call into question their findings. In a departure from previous elections, observer

²¹[2024 Georgian Parliamentary Election Campaign Funding Party Revenues, Expenditures and Financial Oversight - Interim report](#)

²² [More than 2 million GEL in 9 months - who fills the coffers of "Georgian Dream" from Adjara?](#)

²³ According to the CEC, approximately 23,000 observers from 111 domestic organizations were accredited.

groups reported difficulty recruiting and maintaining observers as a result of the ongoing onslaught. Georgian Dream – through their government and elected spokespersons and party newsletters – also consistently discredit international election observer missions. Election observers are internationally recognized as human rights defenders because of their role in safeguarding elections. Attempts to undermine credible election observation threatens the transparency and accountability of the process by inhibiting the ability of observers²⁴.

Anti-democratic Legislation

The passage of the LTFI in May drastically shifted the political climate and hindered the work of media and civic actors. The law impacted all print media, broadcasters, and civil society organizations that receive more than 20 percent of their funding from foreign sources, requiring them to register as operatives of a foreign government. By election day, approximately 276²⁵ organizations and media were listed in the Ministry of Justice’s (MOJ) register of organizations representing foreign power interests, but the MoJ has not yet exercised their right under the law to proactively register other organizations.

The legislation’s vague language allowed for broad interpretation and discretionary power to the government to enforce. The legislation occupied the resources of CSOs and media in several ways, including forcing them into many months of legal consultations to determine applicability of the law, and contingency planning prior to the September 1 date when the legislation took effect. Many Tbilisi-based advocacy and oversight CSOs ceased much of their activities, and took steps to protect their beneficiaries’ data in preparation for possible fines, account and property seizure, and MOJ investigations. In addition, CSOs reported facing pressure from local governments to register under the LTFI, denial of access to public venues, and reluctance from citizens to participate in CSO activities out of a fear of association.

Following the passage of the LTFI, in mid-September, the Parliament adopted the bill on “Family Values and Protection of Minors” that restricted the rights of LGBTQI+ community and cleared the path to outlaw public events and advocacy for their rights. The law package,²⁶ which was long petitioned by the Orthodox Church, restricted the rights of LGBTQI+ persons, as well as freedoms of expression and assembly and other fundamental rights of all. GD leaders regularly campaigned against “LGBT propaganda” to appeal to conservative voters and accused opposition leaders of supporting “Western” ideas threatening traditional Georgian values and identity. In its campaigns, GD called for a constitutional majority allowing them to enshrine the law in the Constitution.

Harassment, Intimidation, and Targeted Violence

In the months leading up to the campaign period, civic leaders, including prominent heads of civic groups; activists; and journalists endured harassment and intimidation. In addition to tear gas and water cannons used against anti-LTFI protesters, individual civic and political leaders were targeted and beaten outside their houses, attacked by roving gangs and subjected to other forms of force. Additionally, posters plastered outside homes and offices of these civic leaders

²⁴<https://srdefenders.org/information/the-situation-of-election-observers-as-human-rights-defenders%E2%82%AC%80%BC/>

²⁵ <https://fitreg.napr.gov.ge/fitr/fitr-pub>

²⁶ The law package includes the law on “Family Values and Protection of Minors” and 18 amendments to existing laws.

labeled them as “foreign agents” and “traitors.” In the immediate campaign period, in both online and traditional media, civic leaders were frequently named and pictured with accusations of being propagandists, revolutionaries, radicals, and/or members of the “global war party.” All major civic and democracy activists and their families were targeted through a campaign of anonymous intimidating phone calls. GD frequently released statements questioning the legitimacy, nonpartisanship and patriotism of CSOs and their leaders²⁷. In a television spot that began airing in the beginning of September, GD featured seven CSO leaders, including of LGBTQI+ groups, as symbols of moral degradation.²⁸ The fear, intimidation and violence imposed on civic organizations and human rights defenders in advance of the elections undermined the credibility of the entire process.

Voter Education and Outreach Efforts

Despite significant barriers, a wide array of CSOs engaged in voter education and voter information efforts, which focused on such issues as the importance of participation, making an informed decision, and debunking rumors that EETs would not ensure the secrecy of the vote. Many efforts leveraged momentum from the anti-LTFI protests to engage with youth and first time voters. In addition to established election observation organizations, in the wake of the protests, several CSOs formed networks to mobilize, train, support, and deploy citizens as observers on election day, the most prominent being the coalition My Vote for EU.

MEDIA AND INFORMATION INTEGRITY

Threats to Freedom of Expression and the Press

The 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia took place in a media environment characterized by self-censorship, political influence, and propaganda. Because the LTFI also applied to media organizations, media freedom and information integrity deteriorated significantly with the introduction of the law, which exacerbated uncertainty for independent and critical media across the country. This legislation increased financial strain and fear among critical media outlets who viewed the law as a tool to suppress dissenting voices.

Most independent media outlets refused to comply with the LTFI, although many feared the impact on their operations if the fines and penalties provisioned in the law were enforced. The LTFI exacerbated financial challenges already faced by non-government aligned media outlets, especially in regional media, which struggled to maintain sufficient funding for operations. Multiple media interlocutors lamented that many businesses have withdrawn advertising contracts, allegedly due to government pressure, leaving them ever more reliant on foreign grants. The law was described by CSO interlocutors working on media rights as a replacement for SLAPP²⁹ lawsuits, which are still used to silence critical voices, as it provides a more comprehensive mechanism to stifle independent journalism.

²⁷<https://info.imedi.ge/en/politics/3179/parliament-speaker-denounces-certain-politically-affiliated-civil-society-organisations-media-outlets-for-falsely-claiming-independence-while-actively-engaging-in-political-activism>

²⁸ The seven civil society leaders include LGBTQI+ activists and two women who are heading a leading election observation organization and the newly formed citizen observers’ coalition, My Vote for EU.

²⁹ Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation

The safety and security of journalists were jeopardized by the increasingly hostile rhetoric against critical media by government officials. Journalists reported growing threats and security incidents, including surveillance, harassment, and physical violence, particularly during protests against LTFI³⁰. The government's ongoing hostile stance towards the media by key government figures sought to isolate journalists and hindered their ability to provide the Georgian public with balanced and complete information on key issues in the lead up to the elections.

Media Environment and Regulation

Leading media outlets were clearly aligned either with GD and the government, or opposition parties. Government-aligned media outlets were often accused of spreading pro-government propaganda, while opposition-aligned outlets faced substantial pressure, including fines and legal threats. Political actors from across the spectrum were largely unwilling to engage with media that opposed their views, and in recent years, the government frequently denied media requests for information³¹, limiting public access to balanced debates and critical coverage of key issues. Additionally, Imedi TV leadership have repeatedly made public statements that UNM representatives are not welcome on their airwaves, and that the political demise of the party is a priority objective of the channel³², without any reprimand from the relevant monitoring authorities. The first pre-election debates on October 21 on the Georgian Public Broadcaster featured junior representatives from GD, Patriots Alliance, Girchi, and European Democrats, while UNM and the Coalition for Change declined to participate.

Partisan battles over political advertising also tested the National Georgian Communications Commission (ComCom), Georgia's media regulator, as both opposition-aligned and government-aligned outlets refused to air certain political ads, although for different reasons. Despite perceptions of ComCom's bias to opposition and independent media, the commission ultimately fined both sets of channels. Additionally, the For Georgia party alleged that ComCom blocked them from receiving qualified status and free advertising, despite the fact that they had been recognized as eligible by the Georgian Public Broadcaster and TV Formula, based on credible public opinion polls, as prescribed by the Election Code, raising concerns about ComCom's selective enforcement of the Election Code provisions.

Social Media, Online Campaigning, and Information Disorder

The information environment for this election was suffused with threats and hostility, particularly GD's narrative that the opposition's victory would lead to war with Russia, and claims that opposition figures were representing foreign interests. Additionally, citizen organizations, Western organizations, and embassies operating in Georgia were accused of fomenting revolution. The LTFI impacted fact-checking organizations and independent media, forcing them to divert human and financial resources to contingency planning and legal counsel. This impacted their capacity to effectively address false claims in the lead up to the elections, especially in rural areas where access to reliable information is limited.

³⁰ [CMIS Report: Safety of Journalists before the 2024 Elections](#)

³¹ [CMIS Report: Access to Public Information 2023-2024](#)

³² For example: [Imedi TV owner highlights TV company's raison d'être as not to allow United National Movement party, its affiliates to return to power \(23 September 2024\)](#)

On October 24, three days before the elections, the Investigative Service of the Ministry of Finance conducted searches at the residences of employees from the Atlantic Council, an American think tank focused on Russian disinformation operations in Georgia. The ministry claimed the searches were part of an investigation into alleged tax evasion related to employment contracts of the Atlantic Council. Employees reported being misled about the purpose of the visit, and stated that crucial work-related equipment was confiscated, raising concerns about the timing and motivations behind these actions.

Social media monitoring by the observation mission revealed lopsided harassment and targeting that reinforced the broader trends of intimidation and hostility of the campaign period. The mission found that 90% of all offensive terms used in its media monitoring effort captured from Facebook were used against civil society and opposition parties, framing them as threats to Georgia's cultural identity and traditional values, and accusing them of promoting disunity and foreign influence, framing their actions as provocations that threaten national unity and stability. Media outlets TV Imedi and PosTV, along with the government aligned online portals Reportiori, Facts and Choices, and Kvira, were the most prolific posters of offensive language against CSOs and opposition parties on Facebook, demonstrating a concerted effort to discredit these groups. Notably, the vast majority of disinformation campaigns online appeared to be homegrown, although ISFED identified several Kremlin-linked networks on X and Facebook as part of its pre-election social media monitoring program.

GENDER AND INCLUSION

Ensuring participation and engagement of a country's diverse citizenry is a core component to democracy. In its initial bid to qualify for EU candidacy status, the Georgian Dream-led government undertook a number of measures to address questions of inclusion, particularly for women. This included introducing gender quotas for parliamentary candidate lists, conducting gender impact assessments of legislation, and legislative steps to combat violence against women. However, over the year preceding the elections, GD's jarring reversal of course impacted the participation of several of Georgia's vulnerable communities.

Gender

Women in Georgia make up 53 percent of registered voters, and have long been active as leaders in civil society. In recent years, they have taken a more prominent role in politics, though their representation was still far below that of their male counterparts. In 2023, a gender quota was extended to 2032 before it was reversed by amendments voted through in an accelerated process in April 2024.³³ Out of 1185 candidates, 343 were women, representing 29.8 percent. This marked a decrease from 2020 when women represented 44.3 percent of all candidates. Despite these setbacks, some parties took greater steps to secure women's representation in their candidate lists. Three of the 18 lists registered were led by women - including two of the main opposition coalitions - Unity National Movement and Coalition for Change. While no party or coalition reached parity, some of the main opposition parties and coalitions established their own

³³ The quotas introduced in July 2020 required the placement of one woman for every four candidates on parliamentary lists, and one woman for every three candidates on 2021 municipal lists.

gender quotas and reached from 23.4 percent to 43 percent of women candidates on their lists.³⁴ Women made up less than 20 percent of candidates on GD's list.

Ethnic Minorities

Although ethnic minorities - particularly Armenian and Azeri communities - represent 13.2 percent of Georgia's population³⁵, political engagement of these groups - as candidates, voters and activists remained limited. Lack of knowledge of the Georgian language, especially among older generations and the limited number of Armenian and Azeri language broadcast media in Georgia contributed to marginalization of these communities.

The CEC provided ballot papers and other electoral materials in Armenian and Azeri languages for the 308 precincts of the 12 most densely minority-populated districts. The CEC also produced a vast array of video and printed voter information in Armenian and Azeri languages. However, according to various stakeholders, these materials were mainly aired and distributed through media that were not used by the populations.³⁶

According to PMMG, a total of 56 ethnic minority candidates (including 16 women) ran in 14 party and coalition lists. Despite some inclusion of minorities on candidate lists, interlocutors expressed concern that the new fully proportional, single constituency election system could disadvantage minority representation unless special measures were taken.

Persons with Disabilities

Despite improvements, persons with disabilities (PwDs) faced many challenges in exercising their basic civic and electoral rights. The CEC led a multifaceted effort to address accessibility and access-to-information barriers of PwDs. Sign language interpretation was provided in all CEC-produced videos. Training for PEC members included modules on supporting voters with disabilities. The CEC developed an easy-to-read election guide and posters including a QR code to access audio and sign language formats for persons with intellectual and sensory disabilities.

Notwithstanding these efforts, wheelchair users still had limited access to PECs. However, they were entitled to change their polling location and vote at an adapted/accessible precinct in their district: 348 PECs (11 percent of the 3031 precincts) were identified as adapted and 916 were accessible by ramp. Due to a dearth of adapted and affordable transportation, many PwDs indicated that they relied on mobile ballot box voting, but this method could compromise the secrecy of the vote. In addition, although several political party programs mentioned the inclusion of persons with disabilities, PwD rights activists reported that concrete policies related to PwD rights were lacking.

³⁴ The list of Gakharia For Georgia included 43% women, Strong Georgia 30%, Coalition for Change 28% and Unity National Movement 24%.

³⁵ According to the 2014 census, 6.3% of the population are ethnic Azeris, 4.3% ethnic Armenians, 2.4% are Kists, Udis, Avars, Assyrians, Ossetians, Yezidis, Kurds, Ukrainians, Russians, Greeks, Jews and Roma. . The next census will be held in November 2024.

³⁶ The Public Broadcaster which broadcasts these videos is not watched by Armenian and Azeri speakers, as its programmes are in Georgian. Local community radios and online news sites in Kvemo Kartli highlighted the lack of availability of CEC information materials in Azeri and Armenian language throughout the period, including 10 days before election day to the media and the communities. <https://aktual.ge/Read/42134>

ELECTION DAY

Voters came out in large numbers on election day, but queues were generally orderly and most observed stations were calm. The CEC reported turnout figures throughout the day that were higher than previous elections, and those figures were verified by ISFED's Parallel Vote Tabulation (PVT).

According to NDI observers, voting across the country largely proceeded in compliance with the law. Voting procedures, voter lists and protocols were visibly posted in all stations observed by NDI. A majority of NDI observers reported that voters were given thorough and clear explanations of the voting procedures and how to use the new technology as they entered. Few problems filling out the new ballot were noted, however some voters had difficulty feeding their ballots into the counting machines. While minor issues with the EETs occurred, they were largely resolved and did not have a significant impact on the process.

However international and citizen observers groups reported an increase in critical incidents at PECs from previous elections, largely related to voter influence operations. There were isolated, but serious reports of group voting, unauthorized persons in the polling stations, voters being instructed who to vote for, and ballot boxes not being sealed. In addition, NDI observers noted a pervasive use of cameras set up by GD party agents in polling stations, many pointing in the direction of voting booths and vote counting machines. While filming in a PEC is technically allowed under the Election Code assuming secrecy of the ballot is maintained, the effort appeared designed to intimidate voters. It also created confusion, with some saying the cameras were for the CEC, which the CEC could not confirm in a morning press conference.

Accessibility remains an issue in many of Georgia's polling stations, though those with disabilities were given the option to use the mobile ballot box or to vote in precincts that met accessibility standards.

NDI observers noted the presence of party agents and citizen election monitors in most PECs they observed. The CEC registered approximately 23,000 observers from 111 domestic organizations, 1,700 observers from 76 international organizations, and 2,800 members of 199 media organizations.³⁷ In addition, 22, 318 party representatives from 18 election subjects were also accredited.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The NDI observation mission believes it is urgent and essential for Georgian stakeholders to address electoral integrity shortcomings and rebuild public confidence. In the spirit of international cooperation, the mission offers the following recommendations to promote pluralism and inclusive elections in the country.

Open Civic and Political Space

³⁷<https://cesko.ge/en/siakhleebi/pres-relizebi/singleview/11035020-tseskos-tavmjdomaris-shemajamebeli-brifing-i-26-oktombris-archevnebtan-dakavshirebit>

- Parliament should immediately repeal the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence (LTFI) to eliminate its destructive effect on independent civil society organizations and media and consolidate the legal framework to guarantee the protection and enjoyment of freedom of association, assembly and expression, and the right to participate in public affairs, at the core of democratic elections and processes, in compliance with international standards.
- Political and government actors should not promote or tolerate violence of any kind against people engaging in political expression, including dissatisfaction regarding the election results, and those who commit violence should be held accountable and not praised.
- Credible allegations of wrongdoing by political actors should be adjudicated by neutral authorities, and political leaders should not make threats to prosecute individuals.
- Parliament should repeal the Law on Family Values and Protection of Minors, as it enshrines discrimination of specific communities and restricts the freedoms of association, expression and peaceful assembly and the right to privacy of all, in violation of international human rights standards.
- The international community should maintain support for citizen election observer groups so that they can address vulnerabilities of the 2024 process such as abuse of state resources, campaign finance, violence, rule of law, media, and disinformation campaigns.
- Parliament should introduce strict legal protections for the civil liberties of journalists and civic groups to prevent harassment, surveillance, and violence against them. Ensure accountability for such actions to create greater safety, particularly during protests and political events.

Accountable, Constructive Political Pluralism and Campaigns

- Political leaders should demonstrate their commitment to democratic pluralism by modeling tolerance and constructive debate in the post election period. Political actors and party leaders should eschew and condemn hostile rhetoric.
- All parties elected should actively participate in the parliament on behalf of the voters who chose them
- Parties and candidates should make explicit their commitment to complying with laws, including renouncing abuses of administrative resources, violence, and voter intimidation and bribery. These commitments should be communicated -- both in person and online -- enforced at all levels of party administration, including establishment of internal sanctions for violations and a culture of accountability.
- Parties and candidates should ensure their supporters do not interfere in the campaigns of their opponents nor interfere with the activities of Georgian or international election observers.
- Political party leaders and activists should respect the results of the elections, to the extent they are validated by credible Georgian and international election observers through PRVT and observation reports.

Independent Government and Oversight Institutions

- An inclusive group of party, government, and CSO stakeholders should convene to lay the groundwork for post-electoral reforms to the election framework, based on consensus of stakeholders to address recommendations from the OSCE/ODIHR, the Venice

Commission, the 2021 Charles Michel Agreement and other international and domestic organizations.

- The Parliament should introduce clear legal reforms to ensure a distinct separation between state affairs and political party activities to ensure that public officials or administrative resources are not employed for campaign purposes. Improved mechanisms for monitoring need to be implemented by the government.
- The government, CEC and parliament should revisit the mission of the IACFFE and consider whether a more effective, timely, impartial and responsive mechanism could be developed to address and, as appropriate, apply sanctions in response to complaints about the misuse of administrative resources and voter bribery and intimidation.
- Authorities charged with enforcing campaign finance monitoring should exercise their role with full impartiality, applying the rules equally to ruling party and opposition alike, and with transparency to the public.

Independence and Transparency in Election Administration

- The CEC should conduct additional training for PEC officials on the rights of observers and reemphasize the need to rigorously and consistently apply all prescribed procedures, including those related to unauthorized persons in the polling station, ballot secrecy, and voter intimidation.
- The CEC should reverse its decision to draw lots in advance of election day, and return to election day selection that is more transparent to observers and in line with the election code

Inclusive Elections

- Parliament should reintroduce gender quotas for parliamentary and local assembly elections as well as financial incentives for political parties that exceed quotas on their candidates lists.
- In the absence of a gender quota, political parties should introduce and adhere to internal quotas to increase women's participation.
- Parliament should consider introducing temporary special measures within the full proportional system to provide for greater representation of ethnic minorities in parliament.
- All media outlets should consider offering sign language interpretation, as well as Armenian and Azerbaijani translation, of all election related programs. Funds should be devoted to enabling increased minority language broadcasts.
- In an effort to increase electoral and political awareness among national minority communities, political parties and elected officials should conduct outreach campaigns directed at national minorities throughout the year, including in minority languages.

Diverse and Free Information Environment

- Media outlets and journalists should be allowed to perform their legitimate functions and exercise their rights, in keeping with journalistic ethics, without government interference, harassment, or arbitrary, undue or overly burdensome restrictions. Authorities should scrupulously avoid threats or steps that could be seen as politically motivated interference in media independence.
- The National Georgian Communications Commission (ComCom) should apply laws consistently and equally to media outlets.

- Technology companies should take aggressive steps to support human rights defenders, deter online harassment, and remove mis/disinformation on their platforms.
- To ensure voters' access to balanced and reliable information, political parties and candidates should participate in all available debates and political programs to present their policies and plans to the public.

ABOUT THE MISSION

The delegation arrived in Tbilisi on October 21, and held meetings with political leaders, election officials, senior government officials, representatives of civil society organizations, the media, and the diplomatic community. On October 24, observers deployed in 13 teams across 10 regions in the country where they met with local campaign teams, election administrators, observation groups, media, and civic leaders. On election day, the NDI teams observed voting and counting processes in polling stations across the country.

NDI has organized more than 250 international observation missions or assessments in every region of the world, including 11 elections in Georgia since 1992. NDI expresses its appreciation to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which has funded the work of the delegation.